DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 151 848 CS 204 036

AUTHOR Stawski, Conrad
TITLE Humanities in the High School Classroom.
PUB DATE Apr 77
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Missouri Association of Teachers of English (Columbia, Missouri, April 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Art Appreciation; Artists; *Cultural Enrichment; *Humanities Instruction; Painting; Secondary Education; *Visual Arts

ABSTRACT

A humanities course that teaches an appreciation of tradition and culture through the visual arts includes consideration of contemporary art as well as classic paintings and sculpture. Study of Leonardo DaVinci's "Last Supper" provides an exercise in the intellectual approach to religious painting, while the portrait of Mona Lisa by the same artist reflects the secular aspect of the Renaissance period. Portraits of women, particularly Andrew Wyeth's "Christina," dramatize the impact of tradition and culture, and the relative importance of subject matter in artistic selection. These portraits, whether gentle, symbolic, or brutal, raise important questions regarding the society, values, and human experience that produced them. (MAI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED151848

HUMANITIES IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

by Conrad Stawski

Author's note:

In trying to present information on the Columbia Public Schools' program in humanities within the framework of the MATE Spring Conference theme at Columbia, "Tradition and the Popular Arts," I tried to rely mainly on materials which I had used over the years in teaching our course, Humanities. I therefore modified a two day lecture on subject in art, its sources and types, and added a piece of music, Penderecki's "Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima." I tried to show how one must work in teaching appreciation of the visual arts not only with well known paintings and sculpture, but with the modern and comtemporary. In addition, I tried to leave a bit of time for questions, especially those that might address the problem of establishing a course in allied arts or humanities, finding materials for it, and dealing with student responses to materials. Space limitations will, of course, forbid detailing the last portion of my presentation, but a list of the slides used on the program is appended to this article.

C.S.

Penderecki's tense, high pitched "Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima," with its nervously chattering strings lamenting the debacle not only of the devasted city, but perhaps also over the dilemma of modern man generally, is a good point from which to approach the antipodes of tradition and modernity. Played on traditional strings the "Threnody" is a far cry from the sonorities usually produced by those instruments, and the eerie, demanding stridencies of the piece, like so much else of modern art, insist that an audience be forced to think, to respond, to interact. With the experience of the "Threnody" as an introduction we can begin viewing some more recent paintings by way of slide projection.

CS204 036

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Conrad Stawski TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

add 1

Da Vinci's "Last Supper," known since childhood by virtually every student brings immediate responses from a class. A discussion of the painting's significance, history and structure almost invariably amazes with the degree of sophistication among students about the work, perhaps as a result of viewing the TV series on the painter. Usually one or more will know about the great Florentine's disastrous technical problems in trying to handle fresco in a new way and his resultant failure with the paint. The instability of the pigment led to restorations and repairs over the years to such an extent that Leonardo's conception is no longer truly his work. In addition, students frequently are quite knowledgeable about, or at least can be drawn into seeing, the almost geometrical structure of the famous scene: the grouping of the disciples in threes and the resultant classical symmetry, with six on either side of Christ, who as the central figure, becomes the structural focus in other ways, too. He is framed by the middle of the three windows behind the table, and his figure describes an equilateral triangle. Perhaps most remarkable of all about the composition is da Vinci's use of linear perspective: with Christ's head as the focus, lines radiate away from it, separating walls from ceiling, marking the panels on the wall, describing the edges of the table, and defining the decoration of the mosaic in the floor. Students will see the composition, then, as an exercise in the intellectual approach to painting, an approach beloved by the renaissance as a triumph of the rational mind. Beyond this coolly analytical treatment the figure of Christ is also the dramatic center: most of the disciples' hands and eyes draw attention to Jesus, the window framing him is emphasized by the ornamental pediment above it, and the light of the landscape behind him is radiant about his head. The math students will perhaps see the equilateral triangle enclosing him as having symbolic value in reference to proportion. And the serenity on his face is again a statement in

classic composure.

Religion, of course, is the source of much of the world's art. And having made this point, the teacher should comment on the relative value of subject matter in art, for this becomes a matter of utmost importance in moving from traditional to modern. The scene which da Vinci presents is hallowed by centuries of Christian tradition and the effects of the cultural context which produced it must be properly recognized. Taken out of this context--if, for example, the da Vinci fresco could somehow be removed to a Melanesian village--the painting would be met with confusion if not indifference, or even hostility. In such a society, it would just not register. Or, let's transport the painting elsewhere. In the context of Islamic culture the painting is simply not possible, for the Koran specifically proscribes realistic, anthropomorphic portrayal of the deity.

Tradition has had a further curious effect on us in relationship to da Vinci's theme. Show a slide of another painter's treatment, Tintoretto's chiaroscuro tour de force of his "Last Supper" at San Giorgio Maggiore, for example, and students are slow to recognize the subject. It's not <u>the</u> "Last Supper." The <u>famous</u> "Last Supper" by Leonardo has become synonymous with the very event; another version by another artist seems to many almost an instrusion, an incorrect statement of an ingrained reality. So thoroughly has da Vinci's treatment ingrained itself in the consciousness of the Western World's art and religion that it excludes other interpretations. Yet, students should be made aware that any painter who was anybody in the renaissance painted a last supper. Tradition in art, then, can have an overwhelming influence in shaping our receptivity not only toward art but religious ideas as well.

In the period preceding da Vinci's era Medieval tradition excluded from art those subjects not grounded in religion. The notion of a

portrait, as such, was not consistent with the thinking of the time, with its stress on the immaterial and the afterlife. The medieval mind considered not the individual but his relationship to the creator's scheme, instead. What better way to teach some of the implications of the renaissance, then, but to go once again to da Vinci, this time for what is certainly Western civilization's best known portrait, the famous "Mona Lisa." Portraiture is one of the distinctions of the new way of looking at things in the rebirth of learning, a return to viewing the individual as having value in an earthly material existence. The "Mona Lisa" is a secular painting. In the Middle Ages ordinary persons were not represented, even though some late medieval artists might have portrayed a donor in the corner of a scene gazing reverently at a madonna and child, the real subjects of the painting. But with the changed attitudes of the renaissance, a "Mona Lisa" as a separate and distinct subject becomes possible. With this painting, too, students will show some considerable knowledge and appreciation. They have heard or read about the famous smile (English teachers here will be unable to resist teaching a vocabulary item: the "enigmatic" smile) and some will have interesting notions explaining the subject's expression. Yet, a more curious mystery about the famous painting is apt to go unnoticed, the oddly mismatched halves of the background beyond the subject's head. Thus, we can see again how tradition has shaped our responses and acceptances, granting to one element of the painting a significance beyond the value of the total composition. Four hundred years of critical and popular approval lie behind the portrait and almost without exception we proclaim it a "masterpiece," not noticing the strangely constructed background.

We have seen how the renaissance turned artists' consideration once

again to the earthly and the material, away from the medieval preoccupation with the heavenly and the unsubstantial. In more modern times, painters in great number have made dramtic revolutions in attitudes about subject matter for paintings. In academic painting for two hundred years and more beyond the renaissance proper subject matter was royalty, myth, history, religion. The Impressionists and their progeny changed all that. A still life by Cezanne of fruits arranged on a table removes the emphasis from the heroic or divine and takes a neutral subject, devoid of "significance," and renders the subject not so much as a realistic portrayal but as an analysis of forms in space. Similarly, the German expressionist Franz Hofer in his "Women with Squashes" is not concerned with the careful portrayal of female subjects in the manner of da Vinci's famous portrayal of a smiling woman but is instead playing with the triangle as a compositional base. An analysis of the painting shows not only the dominant triangle described by the two women but also an almost countless repetition of triangular forms, scores of them, scattered throughout the whole of the painting, a veritable theme and variations in visual art. It is instructive to students to have them look at a slide containing an analysis sketch of the compostional arrangement and thus to see again that subject is a relative thing, for here there is no significance to the two women as personages. They are merely something for the artist to paint, just as he might arrange squashes by themselves on a tabletop for a still life.

To dramatize still further the relative importance of subject matter and the impact of tradition and culture upon the thinking of artists as they reflect societal attitudes, let us look at a series of five treatments of women: the famous "Christina's World," de Hooch's "Woman Weighing Gold," another painting similarly titled, "Woman Weighing Gold," by de Hooch's comtemporary, Jan Vermeer, Picasso's "Sylvette," and

add five

Wilhelm de Kooning's savagely powerful "Woman, IV."

Perhaps the best known piece by a living American, Andrew Wyeth's "Christina's World" can lead to almost a full period of discussion and analysis by students. When asked to find elements which disturb or disquiet the viewer, they will with little prodding usually spill out spontaneously information like the following: Christina, isolated in the foreground, is the only person in the picture and is shown from the back, an unusual treatment of a title figure in a painting; the desolate, apparently abandoned dwelling, with its deeply shadowed windows and apparent neglect, is not the place to attract one; Christina's attitude seems to show her at one and the same time compelled toward the house and yet braced against the ground as though determined not to go toward the building; physically she presents a distinct contrast between a normal development of pelvis and torso and her limbs, for her legs are bent under her and her arms, thrust out against the ground, are thin and emaciated, almost insect like, and the hands are bony and twisted, clawlike and unfeminine.

Other unusual or disturbing features are the directionless, overgrown ruts in the field, the ladder leaning against the house and throwing an improbable shadow, the partially mowed field, the flat, one dimensional outbuilding perched precariously, as it were, on the far edge of the scene, as though in danger of being toppled off over the horizon. In the field in which Christina lies, Wyeth has delineated with meticulous care multitudinous blades of grass in a landscape otherwise devoid of vegetation--no trees, no shrubs, no crops. All of this in a stillness which seems haunted by some vague presence, a force manifested solely, perhaps, in the disarray of the subject's hair, as if, agitating nothing else, it reaches out for her. And off in the distance, not clearly visible in the slide reproduction, a flight of crows wheels

over the barn in the distance. The students jump on that bit of symbolism with enthusiasm. Thus freighted with imagery that broods and suggests, Wyeth's painting is not the traditional treatment of a female subject, a piece far different from da Vinci's famous enigma and its curious background--whatever, if anything, Leonardo meant by it. And Wyeth's picture is still a far different piece--whatever if anything, he meant by his picture.

Now let us have students look at a pair of women, subjects of two Dutch artists of the seventeenth century. De Hooch's version shows a person as she stands below a casement window in a room clearly lighted. She is at work using a jeweler's balance, weighing out some precious stuff. The composition is straightforward and open, not particularly freighted with significance, a typical genre scene beloved by the Dutch of the time and an indication of Holland's enfranchisement of a middle class engaged in the country's already established position in the jewelry trade, which it dominates still today. To demonstrate the relative value of subject and to show again how two artists can take very divergent approaches to the same subject, let us look at Vermeer's singularly different "Woman Weighing Gold." It is almost as if we can hear Vermeer saying, "Hey, that's a pretty good picture," of de Hooch's canvas, "but let me show you what a real artist can do with that idea." Placing his subject in almost the same position relative to a window, Vermeer modulates the light, allowing a soft radiance to fall full upon the subject's face and body. Lost in contemplation, sweetly pensive, the woman in the Vermeer composition is dramatized far beyond the person in the de Hooch. Aside from the light on her and her task, the room is otherwise in darkness, obscurely allowing only limited details to be vaguely seen. Beyond her on the wall is a hanging which seems to suggest the last judgment scene, so popular with artists of times past. After

add seven

allowing the students to look carefully at this painting and then switching back and forth on the slide projector between the two versions of the scene, students can be asked about the relative meaning of subject in each. Which artist invests his subject with more significance? What does Vermeer really mean with a woman weighing gold? What can the word weighing mean? How does he dramatize the notion? The responses usually take into consideration what has been mentioned above, especially in reference to the chiaroscuro effects of the lighting emphasizing the subject. And then, finally, the teacher must recognize the undercurrent of buzzing among the students in the classroom. Of course. The woman in the Vermeer is pregnant. No mistaking that as the light falls not only on her face but her body as well. So--what is she thinking of? About her child? About the relative value of life as against material things? Is a life as precious as the yellow metal? And so these two traditional paintings can help students see again that an artist may place much or little emphasis on subject matter.

But let us go further into the matter of tradition and departures from it in the treatment of women as subject matter. Picasso, working in far less realistic fashion then the foregoing, makes a cubistic study of a young girl in his painting entitled "Sylvette." Though distorted across several planes, it nevertheless gives the viewer a sweet and sympathetic study of the youthful person who is his subject.

In glaring contrast, Wilhelm de Kooning gives a shockingly modern look at the female in his "Woman,IV." With a twisted leer on her brutal (brutalized?) face, she stands glaring defiantly, aggressively, her features twisted and distorted, as though daring the viewer to make some kind of sympathetic communion. Why does a modern artist abstract from the idea of woman this twisted, torn creature? Why, students can be asked, does de Kooning paint in a vein that da Vinci, de Hooch, or Vermeer would never have dreamed of? What leads a modern painter to twist the exterior, visual

reality of this female into a malevolent aggressiveness? DaVinci and Michelangelo and the other great names of the renaissance and masters from Vermeer to Rembrandt, to Gainsborough and through Renoir would not conceive of a woman in this way--indeed, could not paint a woman like that. The questions above are important. Their answers pull students into understanding their own time as their age is portrayed by its artists. They must be coaxed and gentled into providing the answers. What great thinker of modern times has produced a whole new way of looking at human beings and of understanding them? The answer might come slowly, but it can be drawn out. Sigmund Freud. Freud's work has given to modern artists a view of people from the inside. (How would da Vinci respond to still newer ways of seeing--to suggest a subject for other discussion--slow motion, photomontage, stop action, instant replay, microphotography?) Before Freud, the others like da Vinci and Rembrandt had seen womankind as guardian of the morals, keeper of the home, wife, mother, nurse, protectress. She was a figure to be idealized and put on a pedestal. At least so it was in art--if not in real life. Freud's contribution led not only painters but novelists, all modern artists, to see the exterior reality as covering the vast, mysterious, awesome reality of the mind, frequently a twisted, untidy mass of passions, repressions, or libidinous impulses, hidden or partly understood, working not in neat Aristotelian beginnings and endings, but halting, circuitous, spontaneous, overlapping, defying causality and chronology. And society's way of looking at women, too, has changed. And, for better or for worse, women have been torn from--or they have fled from--the home to compete with men in a materialistic, mechanized society that can corrupt and twist. Is this why de Kooning shows us a harried, alienated harriden, slashed across and blotched, torn painfully into a lost and agonized creature?

So far the concern has been with the treatment of subject in painting from the traditional to the modern. But what of painters like Mondrian and Jackson Pollack, who frustratingly leave out subject entirely? In "Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue" Mondrian gives us a picture devoid of subject,coolly intellectual, reduced to absolute classical simplicity. It is the essence of painting: line, color, space. These are, finally, what every painter works with.

Space for this article does not allow more detail in introducing the student to understanding modern art except to say that they can see the continuing direction of growth into the popular visual arts by briefly examining some of Picasso's junk sculpture. "Baboon Mother and Child" is a great visual pun using a discarded toy automobile as the mother's head and a huge lard kettle for the pot bellied creature's abdomen. Students can thus see that artists sometimes laugh at the world and at themselves. The word "art" is not always solemnly pronounced with a capital "A" and a post vocalic "r"--it is not, should not, be treated in impressively hushed and reverential tones as "Ahht." For art in our times, especially in its more popular forms is apt to be brash, resounding with laughter, jeering at academecians and the gallery-goers--even at art itself. Beyond Picasso, a whole generation of sculptors has reduced forms or has found them as castoffs to be recombined in new forms. Witness some of the Funk artists of a decade ago: Arneson's ceramic typewriter, Julio Gonzalez's "Woman Combing Her Hair," Voulkos' hilarious "Woman." What about sculptures that in mechanical perversity inflate, wheeze, clank, grind, or flash? Or just lie there, limply plastic?

Again, for better or for worse, the human experience has led artists to sneer at tradition. Perhaps in this most materialistic of all ages things are to be ridiculed. What, after all, is plastic worth?

For those of us in the humanities classroom or elsewhere who find Christo's wrapping up of the Chicago Art Institute or his draping of Southern California confusing, who see Claes Oldenburg's soft typewriter or his light switches annoying or irreverent, or who find Francis Bacon's hideous painted distortions repugnant, there is not much comfort, no immediate relief. Of course, we can heigh ourselves and our students off to the nearest art museum and admire the Rembrandt's and Watteaus. But, if it's a really good museum, it will have one or more rooms where paintings are distorted and where sculptures in mechanical perversity, wheeze and go clank and...